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Drama and comedy as a form of dissent in Dario plays

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Abstract

The paper will analyze Dario plays. Fo's theatre acts as a harbinger of social, political and cultural revolution. His brilliant theatrical gimmicks and ideas, conforming to the anarchic discourse attempt to employ art as a tool for social activism. Rooted in the tradition of amateur theatre groups, Dario Fo brings out the carnivalesque aspects of popular Commedia dell'arte. As a creative artist and a social rebel, Fo uses the theatrical space to unveil the dynamics of power in society and religion. His colourful theatre tickles the funny bone, and uses humour as a 'reflex of reason', creating a leftist theatre with a difference. Buffoonery and hilarity of his performance shows that humour can be both serious and seriously funny. The unveiling process of his theatrical space gives way to a pugnacious anarchic discourse that puts to test the monolithic discourses of politics and religion.

Keywords: Social, political and cultural revolution

Introduction

Theatre inarguably for its capacity to engage in lively debates on intractable socio-political problems and its potency to propel change has been one of the most cherished art forms. From the earliest days of its origin theatre has been an enabling force against the unbridled power and a breeding ground for public dissent directed towards the power abusers.

Dario Fo is a marvellously talented theatre artist well known for his creative vigour and social commitment (purpose and creativity) combined to educate the uninformed populace on contemporary issues. Education of the distracted people had impelled him to do theatre with the motive to facilitate a well-informed debate on current affairs as he held that increasing informed public will be able to see itself more coherently and with a better understanding of the self and the society. He wanted to teach them the importance of knowing after realizing the fact that it is the only way out of the life of abasement and humiliation. Restoring dignity and protecting the interests of the downtrodden has been the central concern of the Fo. He seeks to challenge the dominant narratives of the Italian society developed and propagated to legitimize the subjugation of the native

population exposing the way power structures seek to determine socio-political discourses which have ousted commoners from the mainstream and relegated them to an insignificant position. He leans on the dignitarian impulses of justice and equity invoking a progressive realization of the rights of the deprived groups using theatre as a weapon to safeguard their civil as well as political rights.

The paper will also scrutinize the trickster impulse portrayed in the play. The evolutionary trickster impulse is a counter impulse working in society. It helps to know the true meaning of social and political discourses. The play in its emphasis on the grotesque nature of social reality reflects the trickster impulse inherent in society that can outwit corrupt and volatile authority figures. Through the portrayal of this impulse, Dario Fo suggests that seeds of evil lie in social and political institutions and not in man. In the play, the character of the Maniac embodies the trickster impulse. He is asked to appear before the police in reference to anarchist's death. He luckily steals a file related to anarchist's death and then transforms his identity and becomes a Judge. He is employed by Fo as a theatrical strategy to investigate truth. They do not want social change to happen. Constantly in a state of transition, the Maniac is a

shape shifter and change personified. He acquires more and more disguises to know the truth of anarchist's death. His multiple identities create imbalance and destabilize the corrupt political system, thereby revealing the truth.

Fo's use of the comic form is not incidental. He devalues the concept of catharsis in theatre. As an unofficial spokesman of the oppressed, Fo uses the platform of theatre for mass awareness and hence emphasizes its artificiality. Low-comic forms generally receive less critical attention than other kinds. Nobel Prize to Dario fo came as a shock to the world as Fo and his wife Rame were regarded as comic actors rather than serious literary figures. Their topical satire, based on the oral traditions of popular theatre, was regarded as a form of theatre far removed from the high literary culture associated with the Nobel Prize. In 1975 he was clearly not ready for the pomp and circumstance of the Nobel, and had speculated on the absurdity of dressing up in a tuxedo and genuflecting to the King of Sweden like a court jester:

I have become famous for my aversion to figures of reverence and genuflections of any kind. This Nobel business is a real comedy. I can imagine the look on the faces of certain state officials, magistrates and politicians I know. They take great pains to shut me up and clap me in handcuffs, and the Swedes go and play a trick like this...[receiving the prize] would be like acting in one of my plays. (qtd. in Tony Mitchell "Introduction" i)

Twenty-two years later, the Swedish Academy acknowledged Fo's iconoclasm and irreverence as an essential part of his work as a serious satirist

He if anyone merits the epithet of jester in the true meaning of that word. With a blend of laughter and gravity he opens our eyes to abuses and injustices in society and also the wider historical perspective in which they can be placed. (Mitchell xiv).

Fo became the most widely performed Italian playwright in the USA by 1986. His play *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* opened on Broadway on 15 November 1984, produced by Alexander Cohen, 14 years after its first performance in Italy. He is well aware of the fact as Rustom Barucha notes down: "the greatest enemy of the political theatre is a reactionary government. But there is another enemy, hated and feared by all theatres- Boredom" (Politics and Satire in India"). He is aware of the proletarian hero's potential to be crashing bore. He writes:

Political theatre has become a kind of byword for boring theatre, conceited theatre, pedantic theatre, mechanical theatre, a non enjoyable theatre. (qtd. In Tom Behan 1)

His aesthetic demolishes the stereotype of humourless left-wingers as well as illustrating the enduring relevance of far-left ideas. His playful and subversive comedy satirizes authority to create politically engaged radical theatre. Fo employs jokes and slapstick to subvert social rules and codes of conduct. The festive and carnivalesque atmosphere of his plays acts as a space for opposition and disruption of

social hierarchies. Carnival is the feast of misrule, change and renewal, and projects characters from the lower social strata. In this way his plays give a voice to the voiceless. Fo in his plays, comically thematizes misrule by employing the techniques of slapstick, absurdity, jokes and black humour. He uses the disorder and irrationality of the comic to counter the irrationality of the rules. The paradox of comic situations re-imagines the world as it might be instead of accepting it blindly.

Fo's theatre becomes "an agitprop theatre with a difference", as he breaks the stereotype of humourless left-wingers in his plays and uses laughter as a theatrical strategy to expose the dynamics of power struggle in society, expressing his tirade against the Italian government and The Roman Catholic Church. The theatrical tradition of farce and comedy in Fo's theatre not only stems solely from the *commedia dell'arte*. He is equally influenced by the *guillare*, the popular, unofficial mouth pieces of the peasant population, who are essentially pre-*commedia*. Fo has often taken the view that laughter is a reflex of reason. Behind the buffoonery and hilarity of a Fo performance there lies a serious intention. He created "what is virtually a new theatrical language, which, combined with mime and gesture, almost transcends linguistic boundaries" (Scuderi 27). Fo acknowledges his debt to the writers and performers who are more frequently regarded as purveyors of mere entertainment, strolling players, clowns, variety performers, farceurs and scriptwriters for various popular carnivals and fêtes. He uses techniques from popular traditions for specific political purposes.

Dario Fo never intended his theatre to become an immobile monument of modern drama. He believes that there is a need to change theatrical style according to current events, scandals and new political situations. He believes in the power of the spoken word more than the written word. His texts are always open to change, "Theatre 'is a living, dynamic art whose completed form is the performance, an ephemeral product that changes with each audience. No performance lasts beyond its duration" (Lorch 17). Fo goes beyond the mere re-excavation of popular culture by combining "dialect with *grammelot*, an invented onomatopoeic language devised by medieval strolling players to avoid political censorship" (Scuderi 27). As a champion of popular culture Fo shows his trust in modes of performance rooted in oral traditions of local storytellers.

His father, Felice, had previously worked as a builder in France and Germany, although, he had also occasionally played roles in amateur drama productions. Although from his maternal side he comes from a tradition of theatre artists but he is highly influenced by the tradition of storytelling which he ingrains from his maternal grandfather who was a travelling greengrocer apt in telling stories to his customers. Tom Behan notices,

Fo grew up in an area which still had a strong tradition of *fabulatori*, oral storytellers who recounted grotesque and paradoxical stories in public squares. He also listened to the stories of the local fishermen, who told tales of towns at the bottom of the lake, where traditional roles were reversed, such as women getting drunk in bars, priests confessing their sins and landowners who would get beaten up by peasants. What

Fo absorbed at a very impressionable age was the art of storytelling, without the use of a theatrical cast and props. (5)

Fo's play *Accidental Death of an Anarchist*, discussed in the present thesis, is about the sudden death of a railway worker Giuseppe Pinelli in 1969. He was falsely framed in a bombing case as he was an anarchist. In 1969 the Agricultural Bank of Milan was bombed in which many innocent people were killed. Although Pinelli was innocent he was asked to appear before the police for investigations. One day news of his falling from the police headquarters came. As a progressive artist and a responsible citizen of the state Fo found it important to know the truth of the case. According to media reports Pinelli met with an accident but he was murdered by the police to hide the truth from public. This play got immediate success as it unveiled a burning issue of the time. Another play *We Won't Pay! We Won't Pay!*, also discussed in the present thesis, uses images of fertility and pregnancy to launch a civil disobedience movement in which angry housewives, resorting to militancy, steal foodstuff from the supermarket leading to a cultural revolution of the working class. Northrop Frye's analysis of comic plot structure can be applied to this farcical comedy. In his portrayal of movement from one kind of society to another, Dario Fo employs the dissident potential inherent in comic structures and shows the ultimate fight between 'haves' and 'have nots'. Northrop Frye in his analyses of comedy observes that the first society is almost always dominated by a father figure or by a male who is relatively older and wealthier than the hero. When the hero outmaneuvers the thwarting father figure to gain the young female who is invariably the object of contention, the two young lovers form a symbolically fertile union marking the beginning of a new society which everyone, audience and former obstructers alike, is invited to join (21). In the play, the audience experiences the cathartic release of a ritualistic victory, while realizing intellectually that the institutional bonds cannot be broken that easily. Yet throughout, the constellation of fertility imagery (food, pregnancy, childbirth) serves to reinforce the metaphoric notion that the seeds of a new society are embedded within both the dispossessed and the usurpers alike (Wing 37).

Fo uses *grammelot*, an onomatopoeic device dating back to the fifteenth century, as an oppositional strategy in his plays. "It refers to group of sounds which, nonetheless, manage to convey the sense of a speech" (Wing 27). In order to make themselves understood in foreign countries, Italian performers adapted the rhythms, sounds and certain key words of various regional dialects and create anti-authoritarian satires throughout Europe. Joylynn Wing holds the view that Fo uses *grammelot* as interruption, as oscillation, as explication to counter the literary, cultivated language of the foregrounded figures and to disrupt both the linearity and the propriety of the normative discourse. The gibberish of the clown 'upstages' the cultured language of the court (12). Fo coins the term "lexical terrorism" for the excessive use of annotations, use of little known words or scarcely known historical figures. He believes that a linguistic content of this nature performed to a working class audience could easily give rise to lexical terrorism

where words are used to terrify people. This leads to a virtual division among the audience. The result is, alleges Fo, embarrassment for the majority and the prestigious elevation of those few who know the origin or the synonyms of these words (Behan 99). While Fo is perfectly happy partly to follow and acknowledge classical theatre, he is far from uncritical with regard to its origins and perspective:

They've always told us that classical theatre is above everything and everyone, that it has nothing to do with class struggle. No, classical theatre is fundamentally a class theatre, planned, written and developed by one social class to defeat another.' 'Culture has always had a class basis. What is culture? It is a political vision of the world: a way of speaking ... it is choosing one thing rather than another, creating one form rather than another. Consequently the dominant class has managed to appropriate what it wanted from popular culture, stripped it of its dignity and validity, and presented it back to the people as substandard and inferior. (Behan 98)

The reason for Fo's popularity is his use of laughter as a reflex of reason. As an artist he hates sermonizing and believes in the power of laughter. Regarding the comic art of Dario Fo, Tom Behan opines that he demolishes the stereotype of humourless left-wingers. Through his pungent satire "he ridiculed the sanctimonious hypocrisy of church leaders and the ridiculous explanations given by politicians and police officers in the hope of escaping from accusations of corruption, torture and murder"(3). He believes in the power of common man and incorporates techniques from popular art forms like circus and carnivals to question hegemony of political and social institutions. The comic, the grotesque, turns things upside down, changes perspective, and shows things differently. Bakhtin in his work on Rabelais explains the nature of the grotesque and its relatedness with the element of flux in society:

Grotesque language, particularly in its oldest form, was oriented toward the world and toward all the world's phenomena in their condition of metamorphosis: the passing from night to morning, from winter to spring, from the old to the new, from death to birth ... In the development of class society such a conception of the world can only be expressed in unofficial culture. There is no place for it in the culture of the ruling classes ... for official culture is founded on the principle of an immovable and unchanging hierarchy in which the higher and lower never merge. (167)

Dario Fo manipulates the collision of cultural matrices to form a toppling, or subversion of one by the other. Using various staging techniques, he commonly foregrounds a representation of what he sees as the dominant cultural voice, and then proceeds to ambush it with irreverent alternatives. In his 1964 work, *The Act of Creation*, Arthur Koestler regards the collision of these contrasting cultural matrices as the source of grotesque and regards comedy as a clash of two mutually incompatible cultural codes resulting into abrupt release of tension, in the form of laughter (35). Apart from the sheer artistic entertainment value, the purpose of laughter also has a mental and political use for Fo. He has often taken the view that laughter is a reflex of reason. Behind the buffoonery and hilarity of a Fo

performance there lies a serious intention. Comedy must exist alongside tragedy: that is, together with themes such as hunger, injustice and the quality of daily life. As Fo explains: “The moment you forget to use laughter, reason starts dying from suffocation. Irony is the irreplaceable oxygen of reason.” (Behan 110). The most universal aspects of Fo’s work is its most lively and communicative, its farcical and iconoclastic comedy. Not the reactionary comedy of the TV comedian, but the irreverent, popular comedy and political satire of the militant opposed to all forms of social and political repression (Mitchell XX). Fo once replied to a member of his audiences in one of the many debates after the performance of his plays in the 1970s:

As far as a preoccupation with ridicule, laughter, sarcasm, irony and the grotesque is concerned, I have to say-I’d be a liar if I said otherwise-It’s my job. I’ve been teaching this lesson for years- the origins of the grotesque and Marxist and premarxist culture and irony.....Nothing gets down as deeply into the mind and intelligence as satire. The end of satire is the first alarm bell signaling the end of real democracy. (Mitchell XXI)

For Fo, the grotesque is intrinsically linked, through paradox, with the idea of the epic clown. What separates an epic clown from an ordinary actor “is the quality of paradoxes that the clown knows how to express through his body, through his voice, through his comic violence” (Jenkins 16). Fo’s technique here is a deliberate implementation of a particular kind of grotesque physical paradox, employed in the “black mime” tradition of Moretti, Lecoq, and the late Sicilian comedian, Toto, among others (Fo Toto 25). In describing the methods of the latter, Fo articulates the radical relationship between power, violence and comedy:

The violence of the comic tradition repl(ies) to the violence of power . . . Toto works on the basis of paradox- at the limits of paranoia . . . (attempting) by means of paradoxical violence, absurd violence, to re-establish an equilibrium in the face of power which is immobile and static. Toto moves, writhes, runs about, shouts, screams, weeps, sneezes, spits and makes obscene gestures in order to succeed, precisely, in destroying whatever is sacred and essential in power, to destroy it at the heart of that pyramid which assures its stability. (Fo Toto 7)

As in the physical techniques of the slapstick routine, Fo’s strategy is one of paradox, in this case stretched to an extreme of language and logic. Describing his theatrical methods as provocations, like catalysts in a chemical solution, Fo likens his strategy in *Accidental Death of an Anarchist* to a scientific experiment: “I just put some drops of absurdity in this calm and tranquil liquid, which is society, and the reactions reveal things that were hidden before the absurdity brought them out into the open” (Jenkins “Hellequin” 12).

Luigi Ballerini maintains, “The notion of a single, monolithic immobile political truth is shown to be as corrupt as the notion of a unified, consistent cohesive theatrical

representation” (43). Fo contends that it is this notion of character as mask which enables the actor fully to convey the paradox of the situation:

The mask is the dialectical synthesis of conflicts, whereas a character carries within him conflicts without ever achieving their synthesis. . . .the actor is an individual entity, while the mask is collective, because it tells of a general concern. . . .it is the voice of the story, not the means of acting it out. (Ballerini 43)

Fo’s idea of the mask involves audience collaboration in a process which is both creatively challenging and enormously entertaining. Walter Benjamin has aptly articulated the theoretical equation which sums up this approach: “In order to turn consumers into producers, it is necessary to turn spectators into collaborators” (306). Fo believes in an aggressive concept of popular culture where people can fight for themselves and bring about a cultural revolution. But before people could do it, it is the task of the creative writer to make them believe that such reclamation is possible. Since Dario Fo uses the dissident potential of *commedia dell’arte* to register his protest at grass roots level against exploitative institutions, it is essential to study the tradition of *commedia dell arte* in detail.

Discussion

Bound up with and reinforced by Fo’s performances is the struggle of Italian masses for social justice through respecting and venerating an antique past. Vehement anti-establishment tirades seething with amoral comedies against hard-headed bourgeoisie and Papacy characterize his performances. He is intent on presenting the abysmal socio-economic condition of the fringe groups motivated by the desire to change it by raising awareness of their dehumanized state. His performances are designed to empower the powerless. They hold his important views on politics, history, and culture which shape the worldview and have been crucial in the human struggle for power.

His performances provoke resistance to the precarious survival of the weaker section of society and actively engage in the campaign for their rights whose freedom is dependent on the whims of others. They reflect the lived reality of Italian underdogs venting out outrage against their peripheral existence and are a powerful vindication of Fo’s conviction determined by his conscious desire to develop a counter-hegemonic discourse against invasive powers of the state launching a scathing attack on the government accusing them of caring only for their interests and abusing their statutory functions and powers by abetting or perpetrating injustice. They disinterestedly pursue the truth about power politics to rid the people of oppression instead of rationalizing or justifying their position and are dedicated to the cause of social justice by upholding civil and personal liberty of the oppressed.

Conclusion

Fo fights on all fronts for those suffering from political oppression, economic exploitation, and social degradation. This adulteration of identities is portrayed by Fo through the dramatic technique of mask. Martin Walsh notes that the *Sergeant* is a mask of a Brechtian sort, uniting inner

contradictions. He is a police officer and at the same time a Maoist in sympathy with the spontaneous-action movement. Fo creates dialectical comedy out of the conversation of the loyal Party member and this ultra leftist in uniform in Act I. The same actor plays the Policeman, who with his flamboyant mustache, self-importance, and intellectual pretensions (he demonstrates everything one needs to know about the latest happening in gynecology, baby transplants, is a typical Capitano of the commedia dell'arte. The more powerful authority figure therefore becomes the more obvious comic mask. While the plays of Dario Fo employ the violence of the comic to destroy everything that is authoritative and sacred, the plays of Christopher Durang employ violence not only to counter the violence perpetrated by religious and social institutions but also to depict the violence and cruelty of a life without any compelling force, where chaos is more "ordered" than order. He depicts the violence inherent in the cruel mechanization of human life by tyrannical and absurd institutions. Violence, manifesting itself in the use of black humour and absurdity, is used as a theatrical metaphor to give a jolt to the audience's senses so that they could shake off their lazy and mechanical living.

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